

May 17 - 24, 2006

## Ending the stigma of mental illness

By [DAVID A. ROYER](#)

During my 27 years working in behavioral health care, I have come to know some extraordinary people, many of who were dealing with a treatable mental illness.

I've had the opportunity to watch as they overcame obstacles and learned that help was available and treatment works.

What most of them didn't know is that depression is one of the most common mental illnesses; affecting more than 19 million Americans each year.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Did you know that one in five people suffer from a treatable mental illness at some point in their lives and that this year alone as many as 8 million Americans with a serious mental illness will go untreated?

The most important thing that people with mental illness need to hear is that help is available.

Mental illnesses, like depression or schizophrenia, are common medical conditions that need the attention of a health care professional, just like heart disease, asthma or diabetes.

Genes, environment, diet, lifestyle, brain chemicals and psychology all contribute to the onset of a mental health problem.

When mental illness is ignored, the community as a whole suffers -- untreated mental illnesses may contribute to homelessness, substance abuse, crime and even suicide.

Studies show that depression is the second leading cause of lost workdays and that individuals suffering from depression are less productive in the workplace, on average employees lose two hours of productivity a day.

The majority of people who seek help for a mental illness recover and lead healthy, productive lives -- with treatment, 70-90 percent of people experience a better quality of life. The success rate for another common medical condition, like heart disease, is only 45-50 percent.

Despite the high success rate for the treatment of depression, fewer than half of people with depression seek professional help.

You may wonder why so few people seek treatment when the recovery rates seem so positive. The answer: stigma. We know that mental illness can affect anyone regardless of age, race or gender.

But, people are still scared to let others in, afraid of what their friends, co-workers and peers might think. This fear of isolation is a result of the stigma attached to mental illness and it can and does prevent people from seeking the treatment they need.

Everyone deals with stereotypes and stigma, but one glaring example of how this stigma is damaging is men who are dealing with mental illness.

Approximately 6 million men in America are suffering from depression, but few of them will get help for their illness.

The main reason men choose not to seek treatment for mental health problems is the stigma associated with mental illness.

Men worry that revealing that they have a mental illness will make them seem "weak" in the eyes of others and fear losing the respect of family, friends and colleagues. Men are supposed to be strong. They are supposed to be invincible. They are supposed to be heroes.

Unfortunately, this perception that men commonly impose on themselves can prevent them from getting help for serious medical conditions, including mental illnesses like depression.

Like most things in life, men and women experience different symptoms of mental illness. For example, symptoms of depression include persistent sadness, feelings of hopelessness, restlessness, irritability, fatigue, boredom with everyday activities and changes in appetite -- most of the time.



An important thing to remember is that mental illnesses can have different effects on different people; women are likely to have changes in appetite or crying spells, and men are more likely to suffer from physical symptoms, such as headaches, digestive disorders and chronic pain.

During Mental Health Awareness Month -- take the time to learn the facts about mental illness and throw away the stereotypes.

Remember -- labels and stigma are hurtful. Stop the stigma. See the person, not the label.

Don't let stigma prevent you from getting the care you need. If you are concerned you, a friend or a relative may be suffering from a mental health problem -- don't wait.

Get help. Visit the Franklin County ADAMH Web site at [www.adamhfranklin.org](http://www.adamhfranklin.org) or call (614) 224-1057 for more information.

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